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Paper Background:

On March 21st, the SU announced the Transformation Plan, led by a Transformation Committee. Emilie Tapping was subsequently appointed Change Director to drive this transition.

An integral aspect of the Transformation Plan includes introducing a pilot democratic structure. On the 12th of June, the SU will hold an All Student Meeting to gain feedback on this work.

This paper outlines a pilot democratic structure for feedback, and to provide a starting point for our future discussions and consultations. First, it provides an overarching analysis of the current representation structure, building on previous reviews and broad consultation with students. Then, it details a pilot democratic structure that resolves these issues – this is by no means a finished product and we look forward to developing this model with our members over the Transformation period.

Current Democratic Model

The Oxford SU democratic model is based on annual elections of sabbatical officers into 6 portfolio roles including a President. Officers are elected on a manifesto, the progress of which is then scrutinised through a Student Council.

The sabbatical officer portfolios are President, VP UG Education & Access, VP PG Education & Access, VP Liberation & Community, VP Welfare and VP Activities & Community. A review of these portfolios will be undertaken during the Representation & Advocacy Review and Officer Effectiveness Review.

Student Council is formalised in the Articles of Association and its purpose and manner of working is further outlined in bye-laws, Student Council Rules and a document called Regulations. Prior to 2024, Student Council met every 2 weeks and in 2023/24 twice a term.

Student Council currently has a membership of a mixture of Campaigns, Common Rooms and Divisional Representatives. It has two sub-committees – a Scrutiny Committee (to hold officers accountable) and a Steering Committee (which administers the Council). In practice however, the Scrutiny Committee does not meet and all Officer accountability happens within the main Student Council meeting.

Motions which are submitted to the Steering Committee are reviewed and any which are believed to present an organisational risk are given to the Trustee Board to review before being voted on within Student Council.

Previous Reviews

For the purposes of this democratic review, we have taken into account reviews as follows:

- Review undertaken by Nick Smith Consulting in 2019
- An informal review undertaken by Michael in 2023
- An informal review undertaken by Danial & Addi in 2023/24
- The SU Review
- The Transformation student consultation (May/June 2024)

Relevant SU Review Recommendations

- The SU and any new organisational structure must ensure all students are represented including non-matriculated students and that undergraduate and graduate issues receive equal attention in committees and discussions
- The SU should adopt an umbrella organisational structure which better fits the collegiate structure of the University through a new ‘Conference of Common Rooms’ body, allied with a Central Executive Committee and Zone committees focused on themed student topics
- The new ‘Conference of Common Rooms’ should provide a forum for student debate and discussion and focus on student motions that may have local or national priority
- The SU should implement an online ideas forum for students to submit ideas that can be voted on and discussed in the Conference of Common Rooms or the Central Executive Committee.

Analysis of current model

a) Lack of Clarity

Problem	Description	Implications
Mismatch with Sabbatical Officers Expected Roles between University and Students	Students run to become Sabbatical officers based on their manifestos which seems against what the University sees as the Sabbatical Officer’s responsibilities- providing student representation on various committees.	Results in Sabbatical Officers dedicating the majority of their time to serving on numerous committees for student representation. This discrepancy leads to student dissatisfaction, perceiving the officers as ineffective, and consequently impacts the officers' wellbeing.

<p>Confusion with Students</p>	<p>The unclear definition of the Student Union's purpose leads to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students only recognise the SU's existence during the Fresher's Fair during their degree. ● Unsure how to engage in the SU. ● Question the need for the SU given the representation that Common Rooms already provide. ● Students asking for change beyond the SU's remit. ● Students overlook seeking assistance from the SU, even in situations where it could provide meaningful support. 	<p>Has led to low scores in the National Students Survey Oxford SU score is 45.6% of respondents responded positively to this question. The benchmark score is 64.8% and the UK average is 71.9%- a clear indication of dissatisfaction.</p>
<p>Working Relationship with the University</p>	<p>The dynamics of the SU's relationship with the university's administration are not well-defined, leading to confusion about the scope of SU advocacy.</p>	<p>Hampers the SU's independence to lobby the University for change whilst the University does not receive clear output for the grant it provides.</p>

Lack of Accountability	The absence of clear roles and objectives complicates the process of	Fosters student distrust towards the SU and allows for subpar
	holding the SU and Sabbatical Officers accountable. For instance, a Sabbatical Officer might claim significant participation in committees, yet verifying the authenticity of such involvement poses a challenge.	performance to go unchecked, a trend observed in previous instances.
Resentment from Common Rooms	The ambiguity surrounding the Student Union's role leads to common rooms feeling as if they are primary providers of student support, without receiving the compensation or budget allocated to Sabbatical Officers and the SU,	Leads to Common Room Committees distrusting the SU when it is ineffective. This results in diminished stakeholder engagement and reduced effectiveness in advocacy without the Common Room's support.
Overlooked Areas for Advocacy and Representation	The ambiguity in the Student Union's function and scope leads to significant advocacy opportunities being overlooked, particularly in representing crucial groups like divisional/course representatives and graduate students.	Prevents the SU from leveraging important channels for wider student representation, and means students do not receive adequate lobbying support.

b) Democratic Functions

Problem	Explanation
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<p>Despite having over half of the voting rights on Council, the College Common Rooms do not feel that Council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The complex governance structure between Oxford University and the Colleges does not allow for hard influence within Colleges and vice versa, often rendering Officers powerless to easily enact motions passed at Council or for Colleges to feel the impact within their College.
<p>'represents' them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The Colleges" are not a homogenous group, and democratic and accountability structures within Colleges do not align directly or indirectly with Council.
<p>Students as a whole do not feel as though Student Council is effective.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Council is multipurpose; it mandates, scrutinises, sets political positions, and holds Oxford SU as an organisation accountable. Council meetings, therefore, become 'catch-all' and deliberate on various issues that may not interest those in the room, leading to a lack of engagement from the wider student body. Its broad nature also means proper deliberation cannot take place. • The bye-laws state that policy passed by Council does not apply to Campaigns or SU staff, and as a result of the governance complexities of Colleges, there is also no legislative basis for policy to apply to Common Rooms, meaning that the only 'people' the policy does apply to is the Officers and the Trustee Board of Oxford SU. In this respect, Council policy is actually just mandating corporate policy & activity of the organisation, and not creating unifying policy in a 'union of students' traditional sense.
<p>Accountability Mechanism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officers are elected on their individual mandates, mandated to act by Student Council (with no clear hierarchy), simultaneously held accountable by the Trustee Board for decisions made by the student body and expected to be active members of University representative committees and bodies. This creates an environment of paralysis, with too many (sometimes competing) priorities and no clear/easy way of prioritising. The scrutiny mechanisms at Council do not account for this wider breadth of priorities. This results in a fundamentally unfair accountability system for both students and sabbatical officers.

c) Policy Development

Problem	Explanation
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Confusion about what policy is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a sense of confusion about what policy is with students believing that a policy can be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A stance the Union takes on issues - Directing the union to operationally deliver something - Directing the officers to campaign on particular issues / undertake specific actions. - A set of vague aspirations
Power structures within Oxford Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The SU will always struggle to properly advocate for students based on policy because of the misplaced expectation that the SU or the University can effect change within the Colleges and
	vice versa. This complex governance structure sets Officers up to fail.

Sector Analysis

We looked at three external democratic models to draw in best practice – Liverpool Students’ Union, Exeter Students’ Union and Unison, the trade union.

- Liverpool students’ union adopts an approach similar to citizen’s assemblies whereby students are sortitioned twice a year to attend an assembly. Sortitioning is the process of selecting a diverse group of students from the membership based on certain criteria. In order to achieve this, considerable personal data is shared with the SU who randomly selects members to take part in decision-making. At the assembly they use consensus decision-making to arrive at policy positions or decisions to do things. To make it on to the agenda you submit an idea to the Union’s website and then as long as you get 20 votes on the website it is discussed. If one person in the sortitioned room doesn’t agree with the outcome of the discussion, it goes to a Referendum or Preferendum. If it does, or it eventually passes, the Officers are mandated to take it forward.
- Exeter students’ union has taken a couple of very interesting steps away from traditional democratic procedures in students’ unions. Firstly, a well-resourced insight function creates student priorities from data. Officers are elected based on their competencies rather than their manifesto pledges. Over the summer, the insight-based student priorities are hashed out into objectives and delivery plans which are then voted on at an all-student-meeting. The organisation doesn’t take corporate positions, if students want to do something themselves, they can submit an idea and the SU will determine whether it has the resources to support that initiative. The University can also call a sortitioned assembly of students through the SU to consult on things that it would like to consult on – for example a policy regarding international students, alongside segmented insight. In addition there is a smaller group of ‘survey superheroes’ who form part of the insight group – these are 500 sortitioned students who sign up to respond regularly and provide insights into student life for both the Union and the University.

- Unison has an old-school trade union structure where branches elect their Officers and delegates, who do local casework and negotiations. These delegates then represent their members regionally and nationally at conferences where motions can be brought by those delegates to direct the work of the national union. However, Unison also has a similar policy formation approach which includes actively engaging members through insight and compositing of positions and actions together.

Principles

As the first review of the Transformation Plan, we acknowledge that the democratic structure cannot sit alone and will be supported by associated reviews including that Representation & Advocacy, Officer Effectiveness, Service Delivering and University/College Relationships reviews. This review and recommendations are specifically about student-facing decision-making within the Union.

However, as a democratic organisation, our student decision-making is a core part of our purpose and defines the culture of the rest of the organisation. In redesigning this democratic structure we have considered the following principles:

- a. Governance- our new structure must be one which involves students directly in shaping the direction of the Student Union.
- b. Accountability- the new structure needs to ensure that the Students' Union, including the organisation and Sabbatical Officers, is appropriately answerable to the student body. This mechanism fosters transparency and responsibility, aligning the SU's actions with students' expectations and interests.
- c. Representation -that students feel truly represented within this new structure. We have acknowledged that the majority of students will first and foremost consider their College as the key identifier within the University community and have sought not to replicate but to complement this existing structure. We have also sought to ensure that those who identify differently are also accounted for through communities and other representative structures.
- d. Focus and capacity - the Union has limited resources, and ensuring that any decisions made by the student population are firstly important to students and secondly deliverable is important. Any new structure must protect the Union's resources and ensure that we have mechanisms to adjust based on capacity without falling short of expectations.

Democratic Structure Pilot

1. Student Ideas

All students should have the opportunity to submit ideas to a Union digital platform. This will serve as an initial assurance that any particular policy, idea or issue has student support before it reaches the Union's decision-making channels. This would also allow for administrative checks

prior to formal decision-making such as, for example, ensuring that any motion/policy/idea is legal, financially viable or would not cause organisational reputational damage.

2. Student Executive Committee

Made up of members of the Conference of Common Rooms (CCR), the Student Executive Committee will determine whether any Student Idea or issue needs to be referred to the CCR for formal decision-making, whether it should be referred to an existing taskforce/working group or in some cases where the Idea is out of scope.

3. Conference of Common Rooms

Using a consensus-based approach, including taking into account insight gathered on the issue, the Conference of Common Rooms will be a space for determining the priorities of the Union. Made up of 2 specifically elected representatives from each College and 2 from the Continuing Education Department, the CCR will deliberate and consider new proposals which do not already fit within a taskforce or working group. CCR will be able to call on the Union's insight function to seek preferendums or other indicative insight from students to support decision-making.

4. Taskforces

Each Sabbatical Officer will lead a Taskforce, themed around the agreed priorities. In this space, nominated members of community groups (such as campaigns), Divisional Representatives and representatives from CCR will decide which priorities and ideas to take forward, with the power to prioritise. They will be responsible for delegating work to Working Groups and identifying representatives and papers to take forward the work to the University or College.

5. Working Groups

Any interested student can join a specific working group within a taskforce; these working groups will be responsible for developing written policies, conducting insight and collating feedback from students.

6. Scrutiny Committee

This group will be responsible for scrutinising the work of the Sabbatical Officers and the Taskforce. This will be a space for receiving progress reports and assessing performance against priorities. Scrutiny Committee may refer performance issues to the CEO for consideration in line with employment contracts.

7. All Student Meetings

Whilst all member meetings are a requirement within the Articles there is not currently any provision for this within the bye-laws and Oxford SU does not appear to have had one for some time. This is likely to have contributed to the feelings of lack of transparency for the

organisation as has been raised throughout the consultation. This pilot proposes the return of all member meetings to introduce a layer of organisational accountability and scrutiny. The Trustee Board will also use this as a space to showcase the impact of the organisation's work overall, as well as a chance to engage all students in evaluating whether the priorities are still appropriate through an all student voting mechanism.

8. Sabbatical Officers

Sabbatical Officers would be elected on the basis of their skills, experience and ability to deliver the existing priorities of the Union. This structure would ensure a pre-existing support network, and longer term priority-setting and better delegation of Committee representation.

Infrastructure Required

Common Room Support

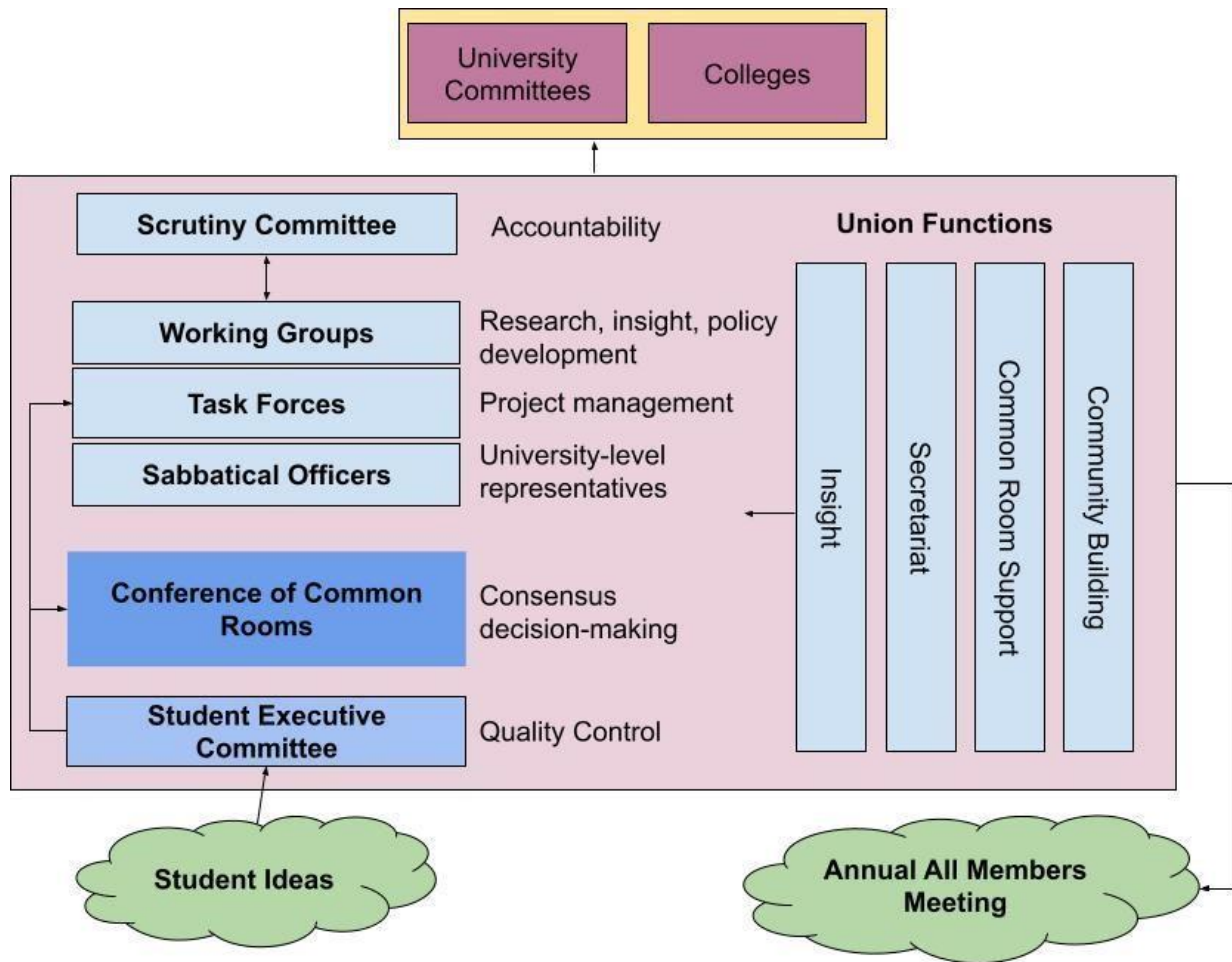
By building up Common Room capacity through support and infrastructure, the SU would build stronger relationships with Common Rooms. The aim of this is that it would improve the quality of representative information coming from Common Rooms into Conference and eventually could develop in to a more structured governance between the SU and Common Rooms. This would include support for developing Common Room governance, sharing of information and ensuring compliance. Taskforces, for example, could request College-focused toolkits and resources on how to take forward policies and ideas locally.

Insight Function

Oxford SU should build an insight function within the staff team; the purpose of this function should be to analyse existing data and information as well as developing evidence bases for projects, campaigns and ad-hoc policy development. The insight gathered would be themed into a range of priorities for the students' union and provide support for the Taskforces, Working Groups and advocacy work.

Secretariat Support

Whilst many of the secretariat roles could be undertaken by students, the SU would likely need to develop a mechanism for ensuring the quality and independence of that support. The SU should consider paid part-time roles for students in these roles.



SWOT/Risk Assessment

Strengths:

- Role of Sabbatical Officers:** Currently sabbatical officers are elected based on short-term manifesto promises meaning that they often work on small short-term projects, instead of big-picture changes that take longer than one's tenure. This then leads to criticism because the SU is seen to be focusing on intangible or unimpressive ventures. The introduction of Taskforces will allow officers to draw on the support of interested students to support with the work, both taking the issues back to their Colleges and enabling Officers to delegate advocacy to their 'best players'.
- Unifying policy and quality of outcomes:** This model, through consensus decision making and improved policy formation processes will increase the quality of outcomes. The involvement from Colleges and other key stakeholders in advance is aimed at ensuring a level of ownership of the policy and outcomes, unifying the 'Union' and creating a stronger overall position.
- Resource Management:** the new ability to prioritise ideas and policy, ensuring that they fit within pre-existing mandates or objectives will enable the SU to prioritise resources and focus

on achievable outcomes. The early scrutiny of ideas through the ideas platform will protect Trustees' time and remove the current scramble to approve motions within 6 hours of submission.

Weaknesses:

- **Minoritised student & Divisional representation:** this is something which should be kept under review; minoritised students and divisional representatives would previously have had specific representation through the Campaigns of the Union on Student Council. Whilst these students will have the opportunity to take up leadership positions within the Taskforce and contribute to work through the Working Groups, they do not have a formal role in the Conference of Common Rooms.
- **Reliance on student skills:** whilst this is also a positive of the model, it does rely on students with specific skills being interested in volunteering their time. This is already the case for a lot of roles within the University (Common Room Committee positions, Divisional Representatives etc) but it will be important to show impact of engagement.
- **Accountability & scrutiny:** whilst a strength of this model is that accountability and scrutiny is shared between taskforces and Officers, what is yet to be resolved is exactly what accountability and scrutiny would look like in this model. Responses to the consultation have focused on the use of 'Vote of no Confidence' motions, it is hoped that we will arrive at a less combative position.

Opportunities:

- **Culture shift:** there are opportunities for a shift in culture with this model towards consensus decision-making where all views are taken into account before decisions are made rather than Officers being mandated to act regardless of how appropriate a policy or idea is to the general student population
- **Closer relationship to Colleges:** the process of policy formation and delivery through Taskforces will have a secondary impact of bringing the Colleges and the SU closer together. This could eventually lead to more legislative and governance clarity in that relationship, further simplifying the process.
- **Insight & Evidence:** by investing in insight and students as researchers, the SU will begin to build a stronger evidence base, increasing our representative legitimacy over time with both students and the University.

Threats:

- **Blurred governance:** this model allows Common Rooms considerable power to direct the Union and its work; this power will be legislated with in the bye-laws (as it currently is now). However, one would normally expect that representatives working within a particular democratic

structure would be bound in some way by that organisation's code of conduct or other policies. This will not be the case under this model and the lack of oversight/power that the SU has within Common Rooms poses a risk to the SU. It will be important to ensure that all who are acting within this structure are aware of their responsibilities when working within the structure and clarity will be required as to when that representative is acting as a Common Room representative and when they are acting as a representative of the SU.